

C. H. McLennan ('Mallee Bird') and his Aboriginal informant Jowley: The source of early records of the Night Parrot *Pezoporus occidentalis* in Victoria?

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Abstract

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Historical records of the Night Parrot *Pezoporus occidentalis* in north-western Victoria have not always been accepted as valid despite prominent contemporary ornithologists accepting them. We present new supporting information gleaned from newspaper articles written under the pseudonym 'Mallee Bird' published in national and local newspapers in the early 20th century. 'Mallee Bird' was Charles H. McLennan, a bushman and well-regarded ornithologist who worked on pastoral runs established among the terminal lakes of the Wimmera River in the Big Desert of north-western Victoria. We also provide biographical details of a local Aboriginal man, Jowley, identified by McLennan as his informant about the nest site and clutch size of the Night Parrot. We provide evidence that McLennan and Jowley were known to each other and probably worked together on cattle runs in the Hopetoun–Pine Plains region around the turn of the 19th–20th century. McLennan and Jowley's observations of Night Parrot calls, habitat use, breeding and flight are some of the earliest published natural history of this most mysterious of Australian birds. They mostly corroborate other contemporary accounts and concur with preliminary findings of current research on the species in south-west Queensland. The relationship between McLennan and Jowley is one of the few documented Victorian examples of aboriginal information being incorporated into European ornithological knowledge. McLennan's support and encouragement of ornithological expeditions to the Wonga Lake–Pine Plains area was pivotal in having the area declared the first National Park in the Murray Mallee region.

Keywords

Night Parrot, *Pezoporus occidentalis*, historical records, Aboriginal information, Wimmera District, Mallee region, Victoria

Introduction

The Night Parrot *Pezoporus occidentalis* is one of the most mysterious of Australia's vertebrates. Few confirmed sightings of the species were made during the 20th century, and none involved repeat sightings at a single locality. There are only 24 Night Parrot specimens in the world's museums (Forshaw et al. 1976), the two most recent resulting from the chance finding of corpses beside roads in south-west Queensland (Boles et al. 1994; McDougall et al. 2009). In July 2013, renowned bushman John Young revealed the first ever photographs of a Night Parrot taken at an undisclosed location in south-west Queensland. Young's discovery has provided the first opportunity for field study of this elusive species since the work of F.W. Andrews in the 1870s (Andrews 1883; Murphy 2013, 2015; Pyke and Ehrlich 2014).

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, finding the Night Parrot appears to have been something of a focus of Victorian ornithologists (see below). However, the basis of the belief that

the species was, or had been, present in north-western Victoria has never been clear, perhaps leading some Victorian authorities to discount the records. The Night Parrot was not included in a list of Victorian bird species published in 1884 (Forbes-Leith and Campbell 1884), or in a list of additions and emendations published a decade later (Anon 1894). The first published record of the presence of the Night Parrot in Victoria is Campbell (1897), and the species was recognized as part of the Victorian fauna in 1908 (Leach no date). Leach (1911) also listed Victoria as being within the Night Parrot's distribution, however, reference to Victoria was dropped from later editions of Leach's book that were edited by Charles Barrett. McKean (1959) relegated the species to a list of 'Doubtful and erroneous records', as did Wheeler (1967, page 77) and it was not mentioned by Harold Tarr in a published list of the birds of Wyperfeld National Park that he prepared for the Victorian National Parks Authority (Tarr 1967). However, as pointed out by Forshaw (1969, 1970), records from adjacent parts of South Australia and New South Wales provide support for the presence of the Night

Parrot in the region in the late 19th century, and Emison et al. (1987) reinstated the species to the Victorian faunal list.

While records based on historical sightings can arguably never be fully verified, an examination of the historical setting and biographical details of the observer(s) can provide important anecdotal information and supplementary evidence to inform decisions about the veracity of historical records.

Here we discuss newspaper articles published in 1908 and 1913 that shed light on the origin of reports of the Night Parrot in the region of the terminal lakes of the Wimmera River in north-western Victoria. We provide brief biographies of the key observers and correspondents and reassess the historical significance of the Victorian observations of this mysterious species. We also highlight another newspaper article that provides an insight into the intensity of survey for the Night Parrot in north-western Victoria in the early 20th century.

Methods

We searched the natural history and ornithological literature for records of the Night Parrot in Victoria. In addition, the recent availability of searchable pdf files of the pages of local newspapers and magazines from throughout Australia (Trove database, National Library of Australia website) has made this largely untapped source of historical wildlife observations easily accessible to the ecological historian (Abbott 2008). We used Trove to search for mentions of the Night Parrot in Victoria by searching on the key words 'Night Parrot' and 'Night Parakeet'. We also examined the archives of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union (RAOU), held in the State Library of Victoria, and consulted publications on the history of the RAOU (Dickison 1932, 1951; Robin 2001) in an attempt to ascertain whether the search for the Night Parrot in Victoria was a formal project of that organization.

We also utilised Trove to search for biographical materials on Charles McLennan and on a local Aboriginal man, Jowley, who provided details of Night Parrot natural history to McLennan. However, the biographical background of Jowley was mostly elucidated from genealogical records located as part of Ryan's ongoing doctoral research on relations between Aboriginal and European people in north-western Victoria in the colonial period.

Results

Natural history journals

The eight reports of the Night Parrot in north-western Victoria during the late 19th and early 20th centuries all involve second-hand, anecdotal information. Only two of them provide any details about the provenance and location of the records and six of them seem to refer to the same un-named source. Relevant parts of these eight published reports are transcribed below, in chronological sequence.

Campbell (1897):

'Night Parakeet (*Geopsittacus occidentalis*)

It has been reported that this remarkable parrot has been seen in the Mallee. Whether it has always existed in that

locality, or whether it has been driven there by the recent severe drought experienced in its more central domains, is a matter for conjecture.'

Campbell (1901 p 660):

'the bird has been observed in the Wimmera district, Victoria, where it was reported a nest containing five eggs was found in some porcupine grass.'

French (1901):

'The rare Night Parakeet, *Geopsittacus occidentalis*, exists here but we were unable to find any specimens.'

Mattingley (1909):

'The Night Parrot, *Geopsittacus occidentalis*, used to be seen by the aboriginals at Wonga years ago. It lays five to six eggs in the spinifex.'

Howe and Tregellas (1914):

'Our primary object was to obtain skins of the Night-Parrot (*Geopsittacus occidentalis*). It is supposed that this form is nearly extinct, but Mr. Scarce has met it twice, in different localities, some 70 miles apart – a few miles further north than we reached in September, and again some 12 miles south of Kow Plains.

Campbell (1915):

'Night-Parrot (*Geopsittacus occidentalis*). – Being a nocturnal species, this Parrot was always scarce, or was rarely seen, although its habitat extended from North-West Victoria to North-West Australia.' '...while we know that Victorian field observers, during excursions to the north-west corner of their State, which the Night-Parrot used to frequent, also failed to trace it.'

Howe (1933):

Recounts that in September 1913 Mr J. J. Scarce 'paid a visit to a certain spot some ten miles north-west of Bell-Bird to have a look for the Night Parrot (*Geopsittacus occidentalis*).' ['Bell-Bird' is Bellbird Bore, located near the junction of Bellbird Bore Road and Rockhole Road (34°54' 22" S; 141° 02'32" E) at the south-west edge of the Sunset Country].

Campbell, A.G. (1934):

A.J. Campbell's son, A.G. Campbell, repeated the Wimmera River nest record: 'The Night Parrot (*Geopsittacus occidentalis*), the eggs of which were seen many years ago in a belt of spinifex on the Wimmera River, Victoria, and which has not been recorded in that State for many years, is known on the spinifex fringe of the western mallee.'

Trove database

Our search of the Trove database revealed a further five references to the Night Parrot in north-western Victoria. The first is another vague reference by A.J. Campbell to the presence of the species in the Wimmera District (Campbell 1898) and it is not considered further here. The other four provide new and interesting information: three were written by 'Mallee Bird', and the fourth refers to an expedition to north-western Victoria aimed at collecting specimens of the Night Parrot.

'Mallee Bird' was the pseudonym of Charles H. McLennan [sometimes rendered M'Lennan] (1854-1915), a regular contributor of natural history articles to newspapers and magazines in the early 20th century (Howe 1909; Mattingley 1909; Whittell 1954; Kloot 1995), including long articles in *The Australasian* and various regional newspapers, as well as contributions to Donald MacDonald's 'Nature Notes' in *The Argus* newspaper. During the 1890s and early 1900s, McLennan worked as a farmhand and dingo trapper on isolated and short-lived sheep and cattle runs that had been established on the system of usually-dry lake beds at the termination of the Wimmera River, surrounded by the extensive sand dune country carrying mallee heath vegetation known as the Big Desert. Based on his writings, McLennan travelled widely through north-western Victoria, on horseback and on foot, including north through the Sunset Country to the Murray River and south through settled districts to the Horsham area.

McLennan's Night Parrot reports

Between April 1908 and August 1913, McLennan published three articles that mention the Night Parrot in the context of north-western Victoria, including both the Big Desert (Pine Plains) and the Sunset Country (Koorlong Tank). Here we reproduce in full and in chronological sequence, the paragraphs concerning the Night Parrot.

Mallee Bird (1908):

'One of the most interesting of the birds that haunts the spinifex tracts in Sunset country is the now rare night parrot, whose plaintive whistling note heard in the still of the night makes one in a sense of his solitude. They are unfortunately becoming extinct. Some years ago hundreds of domestic cats were turned loose in the Mallee, in the hope that they would kill off the rabbits. They evidently preferred a bird diet and the night parrots, occupying in day time old rabbit burrows, fell easy prey to them. The ever increasing fox is another enemy, and when I find feathers or remains of the night parrot there are generally fox or cat traces in the loose soil. On the wing the night parrot takes short, quick flights, dropping suddenly like a snipe. According to Jowley, an old aboriginal of this district, they live in a tussock of turpentine grass and lay from four to six eggs, rather round in shape'.

Mallee Bird (1913a):

'Where hundreds of acres are covered with a 6 ft growth of dense spinifex, the queer night parrot has its home. You hear his strange whistling cry at night, and so look for him by day.'

Mallee Bird (1913b):

'This bird, as its name implies, is nocturnal in its habits. The tall dense spinifex grass is where this strange bird makes its home and often throughout the night it utters a plaintive whistling cry. Between thirty and forty years ago [i.e. roughly 1873-1883] they were found in the spinifex grass on the sand ridges around Pine Plains. The last I saw of the birds was some eight years ago [i.e. approx. 1905], between Sunset Country and Koorlong [Koorlong is a

locality west of Red Cliffs and south-west of Mildura, south of Mildura airport]. Of late years the bird has become somewhat of a 'rara avis', mainly through the liberation in the mallee of many hundreds of domestic cats to combat against the rabbits. So far as the rabbit was concerned the cat was a failure, pussy being too good an epicure to dine on bunny while birds were so easily caught and were more to her taste. And now, of late years, the fox coming on the scene, I am afraid that the parrot is almost extinct in these parts. Being terrestrial in their habits they are a difficult bird to flush in the daytime without the aid of a good dog. So far I have not heard of the nest being found, but the information I received from the old men aboriginals was that the birds build their nests in the dense spinifex grass. The plumage on the upper part is olive green, the head and neck have a black speck in the middle of each feather. The breast is olive green, with black spots and irregular bands, the abdomen and under tail coverts sulphur-yellow. Plump in structure and short tail, toe-nails short and curved.'

We are able to date the first realization by Victorian ornithologists that the Night Parrot occurred within that State as sometime in the three years between the publications of Anon (1894), which made no mention of the species, and Campbell (1897) which included it. We do not know when McLennan discussed the Night Parrot with Jowley (see McLennan 1908) and presumably with other 'old men aboriginals' but McLennan (1913b) indicates that the timing of the sightings at Pine Plains was sometime in the 1870s to early 1880s. McLennan's last claimed sighting was in approximately 1905, north of the Sunset Country towards Koorlong Tank.

Scarce's Night Parrot observations

The second set of Night Parrot reports are those of Mr J. J. Scarce (in Howe and Tregellas 1914). These relate to entirely different locations to those of McLennan, one in the northern Big Desert, 65 km wnw of Wonga Lake, the other ~ 70 km further north again in the Sunset Country. From 1908 to 1914, J. J. Scarce led a Victorian Government bore sinking team in the unsurveyed northern portion of the Victorian border lands, searching for sources of ground water that would allow further agricultural development. In so doing, his party lived for extended periods deep in the mallee, far from settled regions (Howe and Tregellas 1914). He reported Night Parrots at two locations; the first 'about 42 miles [65 km] north of Murrayville near the South Australian border', and the second '12 miles [19 km] south of Kow Plains' [also known as Cow Plains, the homestead is at the present-day township of Cowangie, 20 km east of Murrayville].

Scarce's descriptions of the behaviour and habitat preferences of the birds are entirely plausible for the Night Parrot:

'In both instances the birds were in thick and large porcupine grass (*Triodia*), and were seen feeding out on the edges of the grass, in each case where the grass spreads out on to small plains. There were round burrows right through each clump, and Mr Scarce supposed that these were made by the birds as a means of escape.'

Expeditions by Melbourne-based ornithologists

The reports of both McLennan and Scarce stimulated expeditions by ornithologists keen to obtain specimens or photographs of the Night Parrot (French 1901; Howe 1909; Mattingley 1909; Howe and Tregellas 1914). Anon (1917) refers to a party of RAOU members setting off on an expedition in search of the Night Parrot, apparently the eighth such expedition in eight years (i.e. 1910-1917):

'Today Mr H. A. Purnell will leave Geelong to join with four other members of the Royal Australian Ornithologists Union for a fortnight's encampment in the mallee. Their destination is Kow Plains, which is reached by train to Boinka, then by vehicle through the mallee. Mr Purnell is taking with him 200 slides to secure pictures of bird life. The main object of the party's visit is to try to discover a specimen of the night parrot. Opinions differ as to whether this bird is extinct. It is fifty years since Gould discovered it¹, and there is no authenticated record of one being seen since. For seven years the union has had a party in the Mallee in quest of the bird, and this year they are to make another attempt.'

Presumably, these annual expeditions are the unsuccessful searches referred to by Howe and Tregellas (1914). Campbell (1915) states that 'Victorian field observers, during excursions to the north-west corner of their State, which the Night-Parrot used to frequent, also failed to trace it.'

RAOU archives

A search of the RAOU archives held in the State Library of Victoria (La Trobe Australian Manuscripts Collection MS11437), and the literature (Dickinson 1932, 1951; Robin 2001) failed to trace any mention of these expeditions, suggesting that they were privately organized and not official RAOU business.

Discussion

The first five reports of the Night Parrot in Victoria in the natural history literature (Campbell 1897, 1898, 1901; French 1901; Mattingley 1909) appear to refer to the same undisclosed source and to the localities 'Wonga, and Wimmera District'. Wonga and Wonga Lake are well-known features of the lower Wimmera River system in the Big Desert (now within Wyperfeld National Park). The reference to the Wimmera district (Campbell 1901) likely refers to the same reports and location, but the author may be using the term in the contemporary sense of the Wimmera Pastoral District which extended from the Grampians Ranges in the south to the Murray River in the north, encompassing most of north-western Victoria. The Wimmera River passes through about half of this region on its way to its ephemeral terminal lake system in the Big Desert, of which Wonga Lake is part. This lack of understanding of contemporary district nomenclature

could also be responsible for some later authors dismissing the Victorian Night Parrot records because the notion of Night Parrots breeding in the Wimmera District as it is now defined (as distinct from the Mallee District), seems less plausible than in the Big Desert. These 'Wimmera' records were, however, accepted in the RAOU's historical atlas (Blakers et al. 1984 p. 665) but were mapped using the modern definition of the Wimmera and are therefore placed approximately one degree of latitude too far south. Having said that, prior to large-scale land clearing, fingers of Mallee scrub ran southwards into what is now known as the Wimmera District, as far south as Dimboola (Everett 1869). It is these southern Mallee outliers that were visited by Campbell (1885) – they were easily accessible to Melbourne-based ornithologists because they were close to the Melbourne-Adelaide railway.

McLennan worked on pastoral runs in this region including Pine Plains Station, centred on Wirrengren Plain, and Wonga Lake Station to the south in the Lake Brambruk-Wonga Lake area (French 1901). Wonga Lake Station originally formed part of a larger Pine Plains run and after the subdivision both runs had common owners at times and drew on the same pool of rural labourers. At the turn of the 20th century both these stations were leased by Mr S. Poulton (Kenyon 1914, page 146) who employed McLennan as a dingo trapper amongst other duties (French 1901). Poulton's 'home' station was Cambacanya Station to the east and some 10 miles (16 km) north of the township of Hopetoun (Kenyon 1914). By this period, McLennan had worked in the remote areas of north-west Victoria for many years. In 1900, on his volunteering for the Boer War Bushmen's Corps, he was praised in the *Horsham Times* as 'an all round bushman' (Anon 1900). In earlier years, McLennan was a noted athlete and played football for Norwood in South Australia before pursuing his bush life from a family base at Horsham (Anon 1915).

Around the turn of the 20th century, several notable Melbourne ornithologists made expeditions to the Big Desert region in search of rare and little-known birds and their eggs. Often, they travelled by train to Hopetoun, to which the railway had been extended in 1894. Here they were met by Poulton and taken by horse and cart to Wonga Lake Station where McLennan acted as a host and guide in this isolated and inhospitable country (see for example Mattingley 1909). A sketch map of the country between Hopetoun and Pine Plains prepared by McLennan for his visitors is held by the State Library of Victoria and is reproduced in Durham (2001, page 24). In September 1908, McLennan met F.E. Howe and J.A. Ross at Pinnaroo, South Australia, to lead them on a collecting trip to Kow Plains (Howe 1909). Mattingley (1932) notes that his first journey to Pine Plains came at the invitation of Charles McLennan². He also states that these expeditions had such an effect on himself and his companions that they began to campaign to have the area around Pine Plains declared a National Park, and this was achieved in 1909 (Durham 2001).

¹ Gould did not discover the Night Parrot, it was first collected by the explorer John MacDouall Stuart in 1845; Gould described the species in 1861 using a specimen collected in 1854 near Mt Farmer, WA as the type specimen (Gould 1861).

² It was presumably through these contacts that McLennan was appointed the first ranger at Victoria's first National Park at Wilson's Promontory in 1909, before clashing with park management and returning to the Mallee at the end of 1910.

A further link between Victorian ornithologists and the Hopetoun region is the fact that J.A. Leach was the teacher at Goyura, 10 km south-east of Hopetoun, in the early 1890s (Whittell 1954; Taylor 1996). Leach likely became acquainted with McLennan, and possibly Jowley, at this time, and could have heard of the Night Parrot sightings directly from them. Leach later made an important contribution to the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union, being Editor of *The Emu* from 1914 to 1924 and Chairman of the committee that produced the second Checklist of Australian Birds (Whittell 1954).

Regardless of this early enthusiasm for finding the Night Parrot in the Wonga Lake area, by 1918 the prevailing opinion seems to have been that the Night Parrot was no longer present in the region (Campbell 1915; Mattingley 1918). Indeed, Mathews (1917) had declared the species extinct. In 1933, however, an expedition of 'eight well known men' led by A.S. Kenyon started a search for the Night Parrot which was to encompass Alice Springs, western Queensland and Birdsville, by striking west through the Mallee country from Ouyen (Anon 1933). Even at this late date it seems that what was a serious and large-scale hunt for the bird could not ignore the Victorian Mallee completely.

McLennan's notes provide compelling evidence that he did have personal field experience of the Night Parrot. Indeed, his notes are among the first published observations of the natural history of the species, being preceded only by Andrews (1883). Key elements of Night Parrot morphology, behavior and habitat mentioned by McLennan include:

1. His description of plumage and body structure (Mallee Bird 1913b) is detailed, perceptive and accurate, highlighting key identification features, as seen by a field observer, rather than the detailed plumage descriptions usually provided by museum-based ornithologists, or artists working from dead specimens. He claims to have found feathers and remains of Night Parrots (Mallee Bird 1908)³ and this could account for his detailed understanding of plumage colour patterns. It is also possible that McLennan had examined a museum specimen of a Night Parrot and that this could have influenced his description of the external morphology of the species. The first of three specimens of the Night Parrot in Museum Victoria was accessioned into the collection in July 1876⁴ and so would have been available to McLennan had he wished to examine it. The relevant curator during McLennan's time was J.A. Kershaw, Curator of the Zoological Collection 1899-1913 (Whittell 1954; McEvey 1975), and active in the RAOU at the time. McLennan certainly had indirect contact with Kershaw as he sent a *Phascogale* skin to the Museum for identification in 1905. Given his reference to finding 'feathers or remains' (Mallee Bird 1908), however,

viewing a specimen at the Museum would largely have served to confirm his previous field knowledge of the bird.

2. McLennan's descriptions of the habitat preference – 'where hundreds of acres are covered with a 6 foot growth of dense spinifex' (Mallee Bird 1913a), and 'the tall, dense spinifex grass is where this strange bird makes its home' (Mallee Bird 1913b) – broadly concur with other published accounts in highlighting the importance of *Triodia* as a daytime refuge and food source.
3. The descriptions of the nest and eggs provided by the local aborigines concur with those of other observers, and were preceded only by Andrews (1883) and Kearland (in North 1898).
4. McLennan's descriptions of the call – 'plaintive whistling note heard in the still of the night' (Mallee Bird 1908), 'you hear his strange whistling cry at night' (Mallee Bird 1913a), 'often throughout the night it utters a plaintive whistling cry' (Mallee Bird 1913b) – fit well with other published descriptions: 'a long drawn-out mournful whistle' (Bourgoin in Wilson 1937); 'a sweet, low, two-tone whistle' (McDonald in Wilson 1937). The only person to have closely studied Night Parrot vocalisations, Dr S. Murphy, when asked to comment on McLennan's description of the call stated (S. Murphy in lit. 11 March 2015) 'I think 'plaintive' is a good word to describe the two-note call, and his description does not contradict anything I know to be true'. Murphy also confirmed that Night Parrots do, under certain circumstances, call many times throughout the night (Murphy 2015). McLennan's descriptions are, in fact, the first published to provide any level of detail about the whistle call of the Night Parrot, and therefore could not be repetition of earlier published reports. Only three descriptions of Night Parrot vocalisations were published before McLennan's: the first describes calls given by a captive Night Parrot held in London Zoological Gardens for a short time in 1867 and early 1868 (Murie 1868) – a 'double note, harsh and loud' and a 'faint whistle'; the second refers to a 'whistling note' said to be onomatopoeic with an aboriginal word for the species – 'Myrrlumberling' (Andrews 1883) and to a 'very peculiar croaking note of alarm whilst at the water, which much resembles the loud croak of a frog'; the third refers to what is presumably an alarm call given when flushed – 'a short sharp note given several times as they go' (Kearland in North 1898 page 171).
5. It is clear from his reference to the flight of the Night Parrot (Mallee Bird 1908) that he was not merely familiar with its 'feathers and remains' but also its flight behaviour – 'On the wing the night parrot takes short, quick flights, dropping suddenly like a snipe'. This observation is corroborated by other observers (North 1898; McGilp 1931; Kershaw 1943; S. Murphy pers comm). It is also similar to the flight behavior of the other member of the genus *Pezoporus*, the Ground Parrot (Menkhorst pers obs).

We suggest that the reports of the Night Parrot from the terminal lakes of the Wimmera River system (but not those of Scarce) all emanate from this one source – McLennan's observations in the last decades of the 19th century and first

3 As have Murphy and Young at the south-west Queensland site (pers comm.)

4 This specimen was collected by F.W. Andrews during the 1875 Lake Eyre Expedition conducted by the South Australian Museum. It was sent by F.G. Waterhouse, Curator of the South Australian Museum, to the National Museum of Victoria in exchange for a pair of Blue-billed Ducks! (Forshaw et al. 1976)

decade of the 20th century, combined with information gleaned from his conversations with elderly aboriginal men from the region, including Jowley. In particular, it seems that the aboriginal men were the source of McLennan's information on nesting site and clutch size. It seems reasonable to assume that the source for Mattingley's (1909) reference to sightings by aboriginals in the Wonga Lake area is the same as McLennan's specific reference to Jowley and general reference to 'old men aboriginals'. Because it was McLennan who lived and worked in the local area, he is most likely to have been the person who gained the information first hand from the aboriginals. Jowley is known to have lived for a period in a hut at Wonga (Taylor 1996) and so would have been well known to McLennan. Indeed, Taylor (1996) refers to a report of a weekend horseback excursion to Wonga by seven Hopetoun residents led by 'the Mallee bushman and ornithologist Charles McLennan' which encountered Jowley (and his cattle).

Howe (1933) provides a lead to the possible location of Scarce's northernmost observation, previously described as 'about 42 miles north of Murrayville near the South Australian border' (Howe and Tregellas 1914). Howe (1933) relates that shortly after 20 September 1913, after Howe and Tregellas had left Scarce's camp to return to Melbourne, Scarce made a specific visit to a 'spot some 10 miles north-west of Bell-Bird to have a look for the Night Parrot (*Geopsittacus occidentalis*). It is plausible that this spot was the location of Scarce's earlier observation – it fits with the statement in Howe and Tregellas (1914) that the site was 'a few miles further north than we reached in September' [1913]. If so, its whereabouts can be more precisely defined – 'Bell-Bird' is Bellbird Bore, located in what is now Berook State Forest near the junction of Bellbird Bore Road and Rockhole Road (34°54' 22" S; 141° 02' 32" E). It seems likely that this was the campsite used by Scarce's Government boring party and visited by Howe and Tregellas. Ten miles north-west of Bellbird Bore is roughly at 34° 47' S; 141° 02' E, assuming Scarce's 'spot' was in Victoria, as implied by Howe and Tregellas (1914). This location is about 57 km nnw of Murrayville, compared to the estimate of Howe and Tregellas (1914) of 65 km (42 miles) north of Murrayville and within 4.8 km (3 miles) of the South Australian border.

Also known as Peter McGinnis, named for one of the squatters who established the Lake Corrong run, Jowley (?-1911) (Fig 1) is a comparatively well-known Aboriginal from the Yarrikuluk clan of the Wergaia language group which inhabited the Hopetoun region. His home country came from his father Mircham, known to Europeans as Tom, while he would also have been familiar with his mother Biddy's country of Morton Plains. His knowledge of country extended to the west Wimmera district of Benyeo, home country of his first wife Eliza, and south-west across the South Australian border to Mosquito Plains, from whence he brought his daughter to the Ebenezer Mission at Antwerp in 1867 (Hartmann and Hartmann 1864-1873). Jowley would have also visited his second wife Esther's country at Lalbert in the south-east Mallee. As parts of each of these areas originally supported spinifex mallee, Jowley may have had multiple opportunities to observe the Night Parrot over many years.

Beyond his personal direct experience, Jowley spent extended periods of time at Ebenezer Mission with other Aboriginals from the region. McLennan may have encountered Jowley when they both worked on local pastoral stations, or he may have met him at Ebenezer as he would have passed it regularly on visits to his family at Horsham.

Ebenezer Mission was visited by members of the Field Naturalists Club in the 1890s (Le Souef 1893), including some who would later search for the Night Parrot with McLennan. It was also visited in the 1890s by ethnographer R. H. Mathews (Mathews, R.H. no date). While Mathews' notes on his visit include the Aboriginal names of many birds and animals, they do not include any reference to the Night Parrot, suggesting that he, as with the field naturalists, was not at the time aware of it in the region. These visits do suggest, however, an exploration of traditional Aboriginal knowledge by developing European sciences, an exploration pursued in a more intimate manner by the contact and discussions between Charles McLennan and Jowley. While they set the scene for the pursuit of the Night Parrot in Victoria in the early years of the twentieth century, these interactions also provided the basis for the broader development of ornithology in Australia as Charles McLennan became an important contributor to the publication of the seminal 'Birds of Australia' by Gregory M. Mathews (Mathews 1910-1927) (Anon. 1915), son of the aforementioned visitor to Ebenezer Mission, R. H. Mathews. McLennan was also the first to record another cryptic mallee bird when, in April 1906, he drew attention to the presence of emu-wrens in the *Triodia* mallee of the Pine Plains area (MacDonald 1906, Howe 1933). At the request of A.J. Campbell, McLennan collected a male which became the type specimen of the newly described Mallee Emu-wren *Stipiturus mallee* (Campbell 1908).

McLennan was an early member of the Royal Australian Ornithologists Union (RAOU archives) and was likely to have conveyed his Night Parrot information to fellow members during visits to Melbourne. For example, McLennan was present at a reception held for G. M. Mathews at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Melbourne, by the RAOU Council on 10 March 1914 (minutes of 100th meeting of Council of RAOU) (Fig 2). This reception was also attended by others who feature in this story including A. J. Campbell, L. G. Chandler, Dr J. A. Leach and T. Tregellas.

McLennan's reports seem to have been widely accepted by his contemporaries, including A. J. Campbell (1897, 1901, 1915), French (1901), Howe and Tregellas (1914), Mattingley (1909), Leach (1908, 1911) and A. G. Campbell (1934). Further, his reports led to a series of expeditions to the terminal lakes of the Wimmera River during the first decade of the 20th century aimed at locating the species and collecting specimens of it. These expeditions provided the initial impetus for the campaign to have the Wonga Lake – Pine Plains area declared a National Park.

In the second decade of the 20th century, the reports by Scarce led to the focus shifting further north to the Kow Plains area where a party of birders apparently searched annually during spring of the years 1910 to 1917 (Anon 1917). Howe and Tregellas mounted a more determined expedition and accompanied Scarce to the sites of his observations in the far

west of the Sunset Country. Their comments (Howe and Tregellas 1914) indicate that Scarce was an astute and knowledgeable bird observer who was able to direct Howe and Tregellas to sites where they could collect sought-after species such as Chestnut Quail-thrush, Shy Heathwren and Southern Scrub-robin. Further, at around the same time, White (1913) reported a sighting of the Night Parrot at Brown's Well, South Australia. This locality, near the present-day town of Paruna, is only 'about 22 km west of Scarce's 'spot' 10 km north-west of Bellbird Bore. We see no reason to question the validity of Scarce's Night Parrot observations, despite the lack of a voucher specimen, which Mathews (1917) regarded as necessary before adding Victoria to its distribution. Of note is the close proximity of Scarce's early-20th century observation '12 miles (19 km) south of Kow Plains' with the mid-20th century reports of Evan Walton of Walpeup at Ross Spring, some 12 km south-east of Kow Plains homestead (Menkhorst and Isles 1981).

We believe that the evidence collated here strongly supports the presence of the Night Parrot in both the Big Desert and Sunset Country of north-western Victoria between the 1870s and early 1900s. We also show that reports of the Night Parrot in this region were instrumental in the development of ornithology in the region, and in the development of the current extensive conservation reserve system in the Victorian Mallee.

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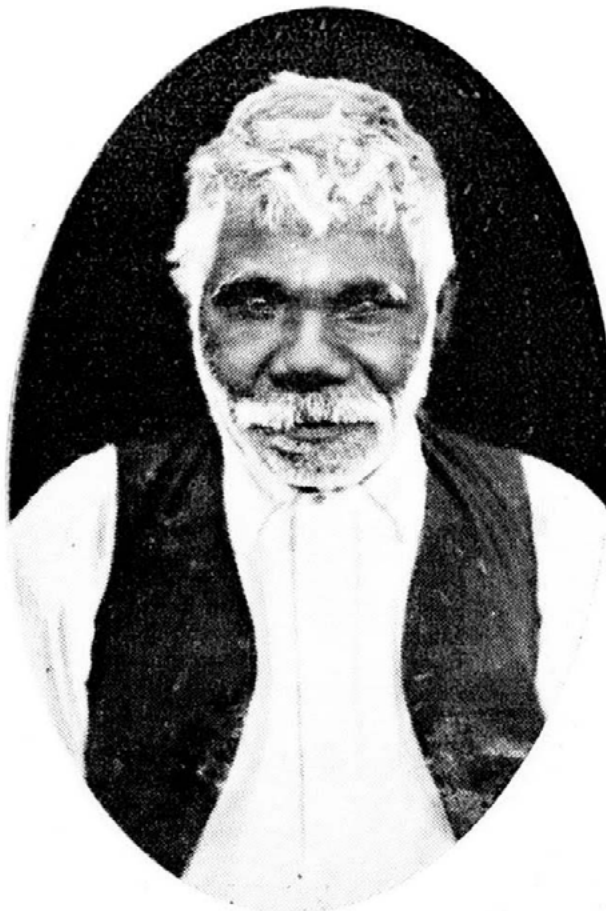


Figure 1. Portrait of Jowley published in 'Back to Hopetoun' (1935), original source unknown.

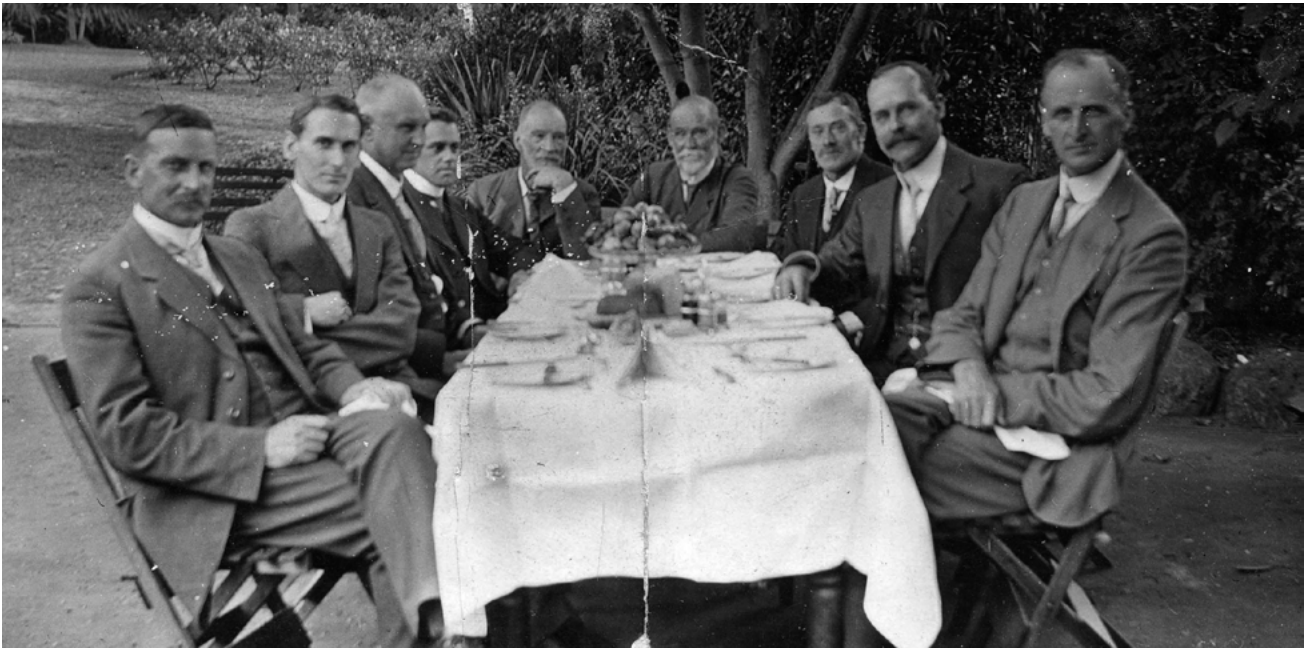


Figure 2. Participants at a reception held for Gregory Mathews by the 1914 RAOU Council at Melbourne's Royal Botanic Gardens on 10 March 1914. From left to right the participants are: Dr J. Leach, L. Chandler, C. McLennan, C. Barrett, A.J. Campbell, D. Le Souef, T. Tregellas, Z. Grey and G. Mathews.